

**The university is now on air,  
broadcasting modern architecture**

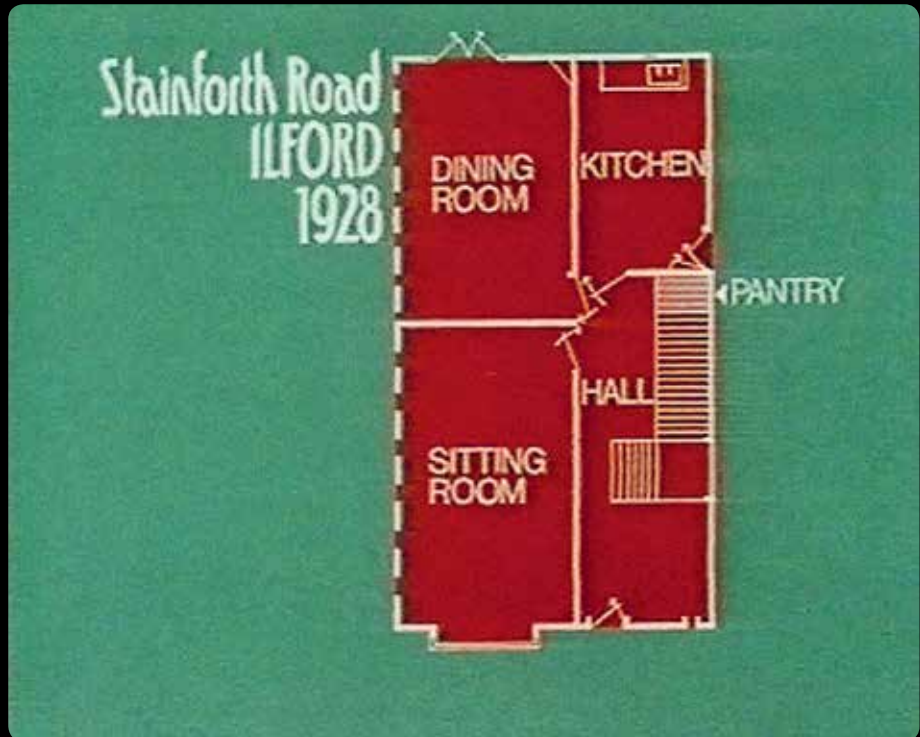
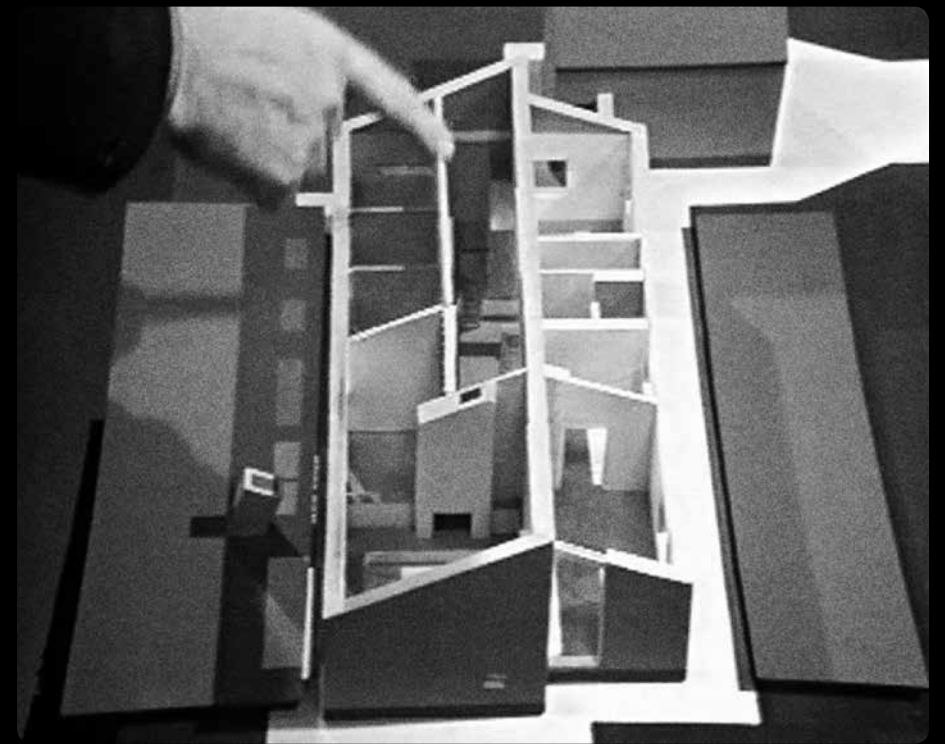
**Eight episodes by  
Joaquim Moreno**

**In conversation with  
Tim Benton  
Nick Levinson  
Adrian Forty  
Joseph Rykwert  
Stephen Bayley**

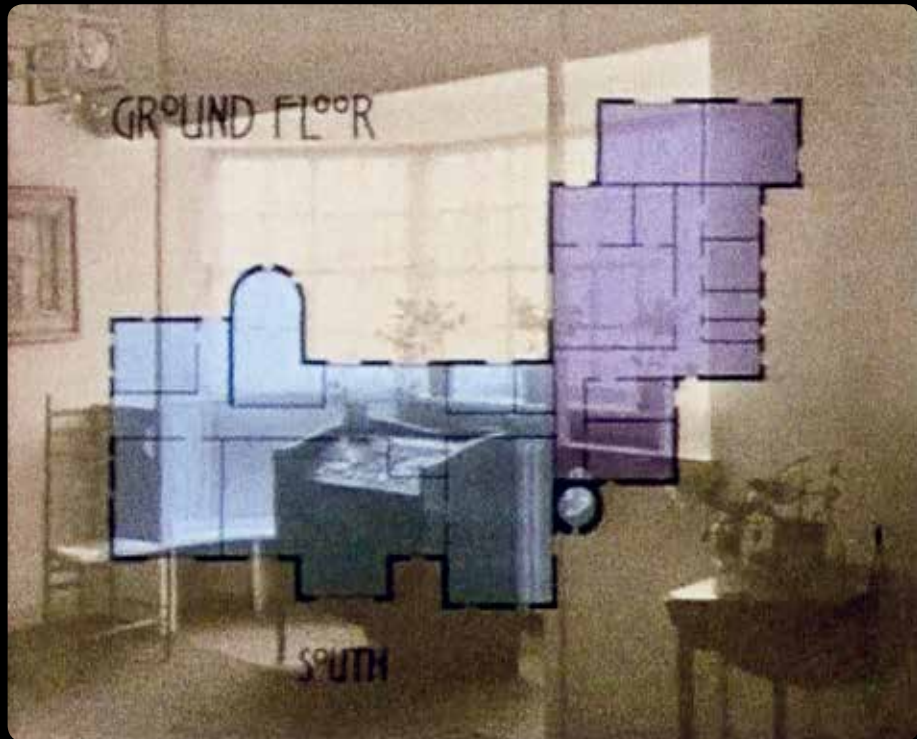
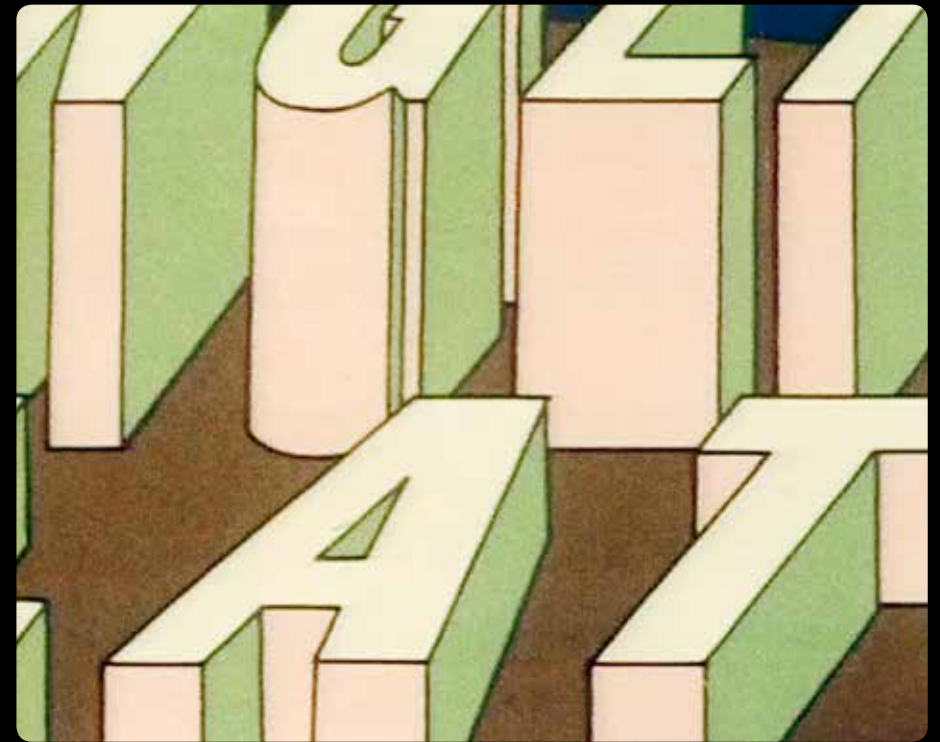
**With contributions by  
Nick Beech  
Laura Carter  
Ben Highmore  
Joseph Bedford**

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- TV 23 The Semi-Detached House
- TV 1 What is Architecture?: An Architect at Work
- TV 14 English Flats of the Thirties
- TV 2 The Universal International Exhibition, Paris, 1900
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- TV 14 English Flats of the Thirties



1

# Shared Audience, Open Education

Open,  
wireless,  
of the air,  
at a distance,  
door-to-door,  
by correspondence,  
extramural,  
remedial,  
continuing and adult education  
—when these notions collided in postwar Britain,  
the tensions between them reorganized the relationship among  
media,  
geography,  
and education,  
transforming the very idea of a university. This  
transformation manifested in The Open University  
(OU), a new kind of decentralized institution  
founded in 1969.



In his 1976 book *Open University: A Personal Account by the First Vice-Chancellor*, Walter Perry highlights the key ideas that underpinned this endeavour:

The concept of the Open University evolved from the convergence of three major postwar educational trends. The first of these concerns developments in the provision for adult education, the second the growth of educational broadcasting and the third the political objective of promoting the spread of egalitarianism in education.

According to this vision, the OU would mobilize mass media to expand mass education beyond the walls of conventional universities and to open up access to higher education to parts of the population that had typically been excluded from conventional systems—especially working adults.



[A]

In doing so, The Open University positioned itself as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, existing institutions, operating through different channels. This was part of an ambitious political project captured by future Prime Minister Harold Wilson in his 1963 Labour Conference speech, *Labour's Plan for Science*, which introduced the party's plan for a “university of the air”:

It is designed to provide an opportunity for those who, for one reason or another, have not been able to take advantage of higher education, now to do so with all that TV and radio and the State-sponsored correspondence course, and the facilities of a university for setting and marking papers and conducting examinations, in awarding degrees, can provide.



[B]

As opposed to the methods used in traditional universities, this new kind of university could develop new formats of dissemination and new ways of learning and teaching that were mediated by interactions with technologies not commonly used for higher



education at the time. Content would be presented through a blended system that combined television and radio broadcasts, correspondence courses, programmed tutorials, and examinations, as well as group study at regional and local centres.

Such a project, a conspiracy to fuse culture, education, and media was, from the outset, based on sharing resources and sharing education.

The university of the air would share the space created by television and radio in order to broadcast higher education and make it more accessible to students as well as the general public.

The student and the everyday viewer would become the same audience, such that the OU,

rather than simply supplementing higher education, could potentially have a much greater effect on Britain's cultural life and technological progress. It was during the time that elapsed between Harold Wilson's 1963 Party Conference speech, his subsequent 1964 electoral speech, and his 1966 election manifesto speech

—he was then running for re-election—that the idea of a university of the air transformed into the idea of an *open* university.



[C]

The phrase “of the air” was considered derogatory because it implied that

the association between education and entertainment somehow made the former less substantive. And given that it centred on the way content would be disseminated through mass media rather than on the educational aims being pursued, the phrase also only partially explained the blended system of the new institution and the wider social benefits associated with it.

By contrast, the word “open” made a very different point: an open university would breach entrenched social boundaries

and welcome those for whom higher education might have been inaccessible up to that point. As Wilson stated in the 1966 manifesto:

This open university will obviously extend the best teaching facilities and give everyone the opportunity of study for a full degree. It will mean genuine equality of opportunity for millions of people for the first time.

This was the first official political commitment of the Labour Government to the idea of The Open University, and it provides evidence of the impact of the Ministry of Education White Paper titled

“A University of the Air,” also published in 1966, under the leadership of the Minister for the Arts, Jennie Lee.

Lee had been tasked by Wilson to guide the development of The Open University within the newly formed Department of Education and Science.

She led the Advisory Committee that produced the 1966 White Paper, which outlined various ways in which the new institution would be more open than others:

Enrolment as a student of the University should be open to everyone on payment of a registration fee, irrespective of educational qualifications, and no formal entrance requirement should be imposed.

To fulfill this mandate, the OU catered most particularly to working adults

who had to study part time, sharing their schedule with work and other responsibilities.

“If I can work at home for an Open University degree, so can you!”

[D]



The OU therefore scheduled the television and radio programmes for its courses accordingly, inserting them into the flow of prime-time programming at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC),

which was already designated as the OU’s broadcasting partner:

The television programmes will be broadcast for forty weeks a year at peak viewing time, i.e. in the early or mid-evening on week days, and, to meet the needs of shift workers and others who are not free in the evenings, programmes will also be broadcast during the day, including early morning, and at late night and week-ends.

The 1966 White Paper made clear that to be open, the OU also had to be public —a shared cultural resource—

using media to share its content with a wider audience. As a result, the expected social and cultural impact of the OU would reach well beyond its enrolled students; the success of the university's openness would be measured by its total audience. But the White Paper also reaffirmed that even if only a small portion of the OU's potential viewers would graduate, this would nonetheless represent an increase in higher education participation nationally, and that the achievement would be momentous for individual students and for communities at large:

If the present rate of technological and cultural advance is to be sustained, it will depend not only on those who have reached the highest educational level, but on a population that is generally literate and well-informed.



[E]

Having published the White Paper, the next step in the development of this new form of mass higher education was to materialize the idea of a decentralized university.

To do this, Sir Peter Venables, the Chair of the Planning Committee for the OU, brought together a combination of

several vice-chancellors from both new and well-established traditional universities, faculty with experience in adult education, and technologists and experts in educational broadcasting.

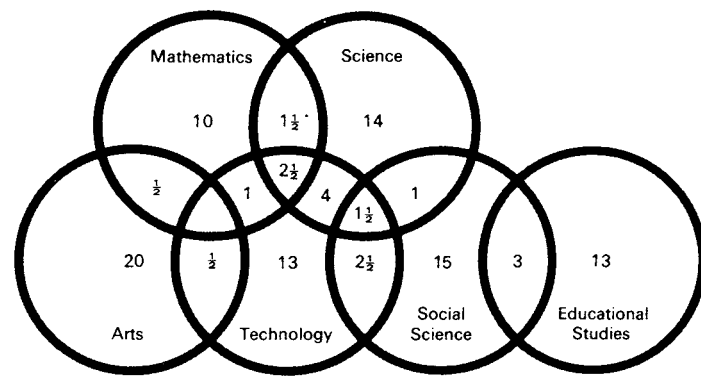
One of the objectives of the OU outlined in the Committee's report, published in 1969, was to redress past shortcomings of the educational system,

plainly reinforcing the responsibility of the OU to provide a second opportunity for the postwar generation.

The report reinforced the OU's openness to students who enrolled without formal academic qualifications by introducing a series of foundation courses

“designed as a means of familiarizing mature students with the modern concepts of the main ‘lines’ of study” —the first four courses offered were Mathematics, Understanding Science, Literature and Culture, and Understanding Society.





But the report was truly novel in the way it outlined the role of broadcasting in higher education:

Broadcasting, then, can most effectively be used as a component part of a fully integrated teaching system which also makes use of printed material, including specially written textbooks and directions for further reading; of correspondence tuition; of part-time face-to-face teaching, and of group discussion.

Broadcasting was a means for disseminating educational content quickly, but such speed came at a steep cost:

using television,  
an expensive media,  
obligated the OU to ensure the efficacy of its presentations and their universal appeal,  
as well as the social and cultural  
interest of their contents to a broader  
audience than its enrolled students.

For the Planning Committee, this new education strategy was too expensive to be narrow in its focus and poor in its presentation. Broadcasting during prime-time hours maximized the audience

which, in turn, justified the OU's approach of bringing together leaders in various fields to share their expertise and skilled presenters to ensure effective communication.

The Committee's report also pointed out that broadcasting was a way of returning in cultural value the expense incurred by multimedia production while also allowing prospective students to sample various courses, browse different fields of study, and measure their own capacities against the demands of the OU before deciding to enroll.



Diffusion through broadcasting meant that the OU was advertised through the very medium of its pedagogy and expertise. By being broadcast during coveted prime-time slots, the OU was getting the same exposure as expensive commercial advertising,

which made for accidental discoveries;  
it was a way for viewers to find the OU  
without searching.

Finally,  
the Planning Committee's report contained an  
important appendix that laid the ground rules for  
the partnership between the nascent university  
and the BBC. The OU would share both the BBC's  
audience and its infrastructure, a relationship  
that made the inception of the university possible  
but also had a profound impact on its institutional  
structure.

Inevitably,  
this became a point of friction  
between the two institutions,  
which had very different operational  
structures and overarching goals.

The appendix of the Planning Committee's  
report clearly stated the complexity inherent in  
this sharing of resources:

The University will prescribe the academic objectives and  
general character of the broadcasts, in relation to the other  
component parts of each course, while the B.B.C. will  
provide the necessary presentation and production skills.  
In the overlapping area—where the inter-relationship of  
content and presentation is worked out—a reasonable  
degree of flexibility on both sides is essential in order to  
secure the proper concern of the academic staff and the  
fullest use of the experience of the broadcasting staff.

Once the groundwork for the operation of The  
Open University was established, the new  
university was awarded its Charter during the

first meeting of the Congregation of The University  
in July 1969.

On the occasion, Lord Crowther,  
the newly appointed Chancellor,  
pronounced the many ways of being  
open that remain part of the  
OU's mission statement to this day:

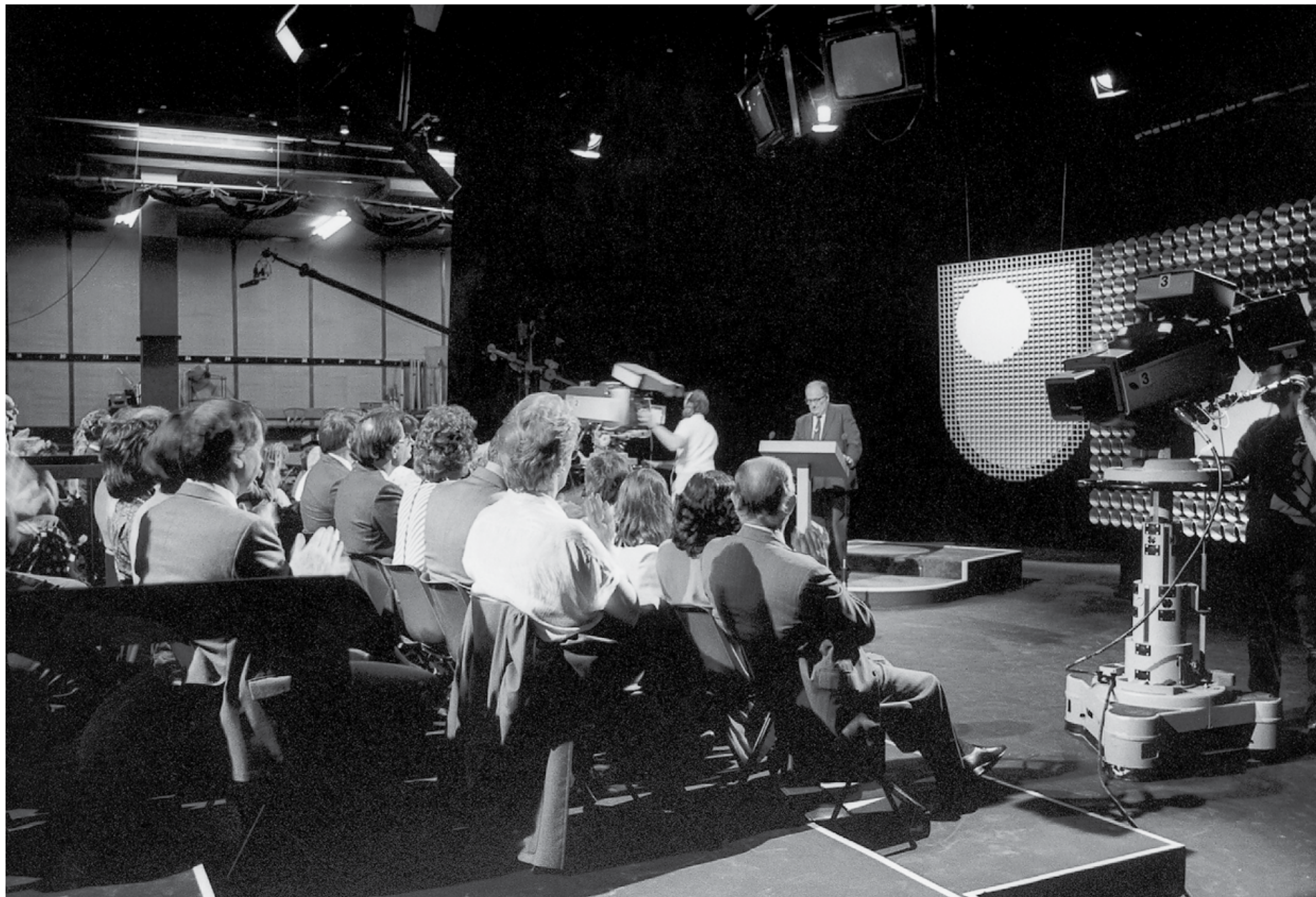
We are open as to places. This University has no cloisters  
—a word meaning closed. We have no courts—or spaces  
enclosed by buildings. Hardly even shall we have a campus.  
The rest of the University will be disembodied and air-borne.  
From the start, it will flow all over the United Kingdom.

Open to people,  
to places,  
to methods,  
and to ideas:

an all-encompassing openness that would make  
decision-making processes, which were typically  
internal to an institution, more difficult.

This new university without boundaries  
—airborne, disembodied, and flowing  
throughout the United Kingdom—  
was not only sharing  
the audience,  
airtime,  
and production machinery of the BBC  
but also the infrastructure of other  
universities and community services  
like post offices, libraries, and halls,  
the latter of which provided spaces  
for collective tutorials.







These networks enabled the OU to operate as a decentralized university, addressing every student at home.

At the same time, the OU and the BBC engaged in complex negotiations over the OU's need to broadcast courses outside working hours and the BBC's desire to reserve prime-time hours for entertainment and news. The BBC's expectation that all public programming fulfill its mandate to inform, educate, and entertain competed with the demand of the smaller OU audience to finally be able to participate in higher education.



[1]

While both OU students and BBC viewers could appreciate the opportunity to engage with cultural content through radio and television, the latter audience did not necessarily want to sit through

specialized educational broadcasts during their leisure time. With the multiplication of broadcasting channels,

both public and commercial, viewers were now faced with choosing among the multiple programmes reaching their private television sets simultaneously. Given that multiple broadcasters were now sharing the same audience, it was increasingly difficult to conceive of a single flow of programming that could achieve social synchronization through mass media.

By intervening in the domestic sphere, the OU was sharing higher education well beyond the cloisters of conventional universities, to an unseen and unspecified audience. However,

because it lacked a dedicated channel, space, and audience, the OU was forced to constantly compromise between the institution, the public, and the media through which openness could be achieved.

This commitment to a principle of openness thus limited the freedom of each one of the stakeholders:

political decisions informed academic freedom,

personal opinion,  
social conventions,  
and ideological positions,

while the collective institutional voice of the OU  
and the BBC further restricted the individual  
academic freedom of members of the OU course  
teams, the groups of specialists responsible  
for designing each course.



[4]

The mechanics of course design required a more  
collegial and less personal approach, and the  
academic views presented would only be allowed  
as much freedom as was fit to be broadcast in  
publicly accessible media.

By entering the homes of a general  
audience, academic discourse was  
being domesticated.

The accessibility of courses and their materials  
—in print, visual, and aural formats—to a broader  
public outside the confines of the traditional

academy implied great scrutiny of OU educational  
content. As Walter Perry remarked in his 1976  
personal account:

What is taught to the students is open not only to their  
criticism, but also to that of students in other institutions,  
of professional broadcasting critics, of politicians and  
of the general public. This very openness results in the  
academic staff responsible for designing the courses  
taking greater pains over what is offered than they would  
if they were presenting such materials behind the closed  
doors of the classroom. Statements will tend to be hedged  
in with reservations and qualifications, rather than made  
boldly and vested in the authority of the pedagogue.

To exist through mass media the university  
therefore had to speak not to cloistered students  
but rather to everyone who could receive its  
broadcasts at home,  
in their living room,  
through the special window of television.

Soon after Perry's publication, Robert Rowland,  
then head of BBC's Open University Production  
Centre,

also noted the friction  
caused by the principle of openness  
in his 1977 article,

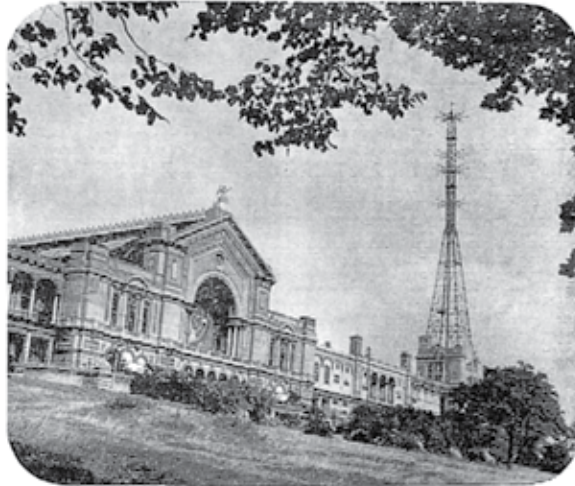
"The University in a Palace,"  
published in the *The Listener*,

a weekly magazine to supplement broadcast  
programmes by the BBC that ran from 1929 to 1991.  
On one hand, Rowland outlines the scope of the  
operation, stating that in that year the BBC would  
transmit, from its studios at Alexandra Palace  
in London, "over 1,500 television programmes

and 1,500 radio programmes, over four channels, covering about 100 ‘courses’” for the OU.

‘This is the place where  
real television began’

[K]



On the other, he clearly frames the perils of broadcasting public education on such a scale:

No university has ever had so much potential access to the eyes and ears of a vast concourse of people as The Open University. This wedding of academic freedom with public responsibility works for most of the time, but sometimes throws up problems and difficulties which are the essence of adventure, particularly a shared one.... If “access” is “giving,” The Open University is “sharing,” both have their place in the walk into the future. I might just be forgiven at the moment for suggesting that to share is as difficult and complex as to “give” — perhaps more so.

As the OU course catalogue continued to expand beyond what was viable for the BBC to air during prime time, the friction between the OU and the BBC was eventually mitigated by the commercial dis-

semination of home video recording devices. Within the decade following the first OU broadcasts in 1971, these devices, the new media memory of television, were becoming increasingly available to the public.

At the same time, the OU began mailing videocassette tapes to its students while continuing to air its regular public programmes. Before private copies of television broadcasts could be produced in the home, the ephemeral character of television had required that broadcasters, like the BBC, synchronize programming with audience availability. This had not only carved out a space for educational television during prime-time hours, but also resulted in a substantial community of viewers for Open University programmes.

By contrast, the ability to view videocassette recordings off air not only enabled unprecedented spectator agency, allowing students to pace their own viewing schedules, but also provided a rationale for pushing educational programming to less popular time slots.

One OU course which was gradually pushed out of prime time was the third-level arts course A305,





[L]

**History of Architecture and Design 1890–1939.**  
**Over the course of its life on air, from 1975 to 1982,**  
**A305's television broadcasts were rescheduled**  
**from 8:55 a.m. on Saturdays**  
**to 6:25 a.m. on Sundays**  
**and its radio broadcasts were rescheduled**  
**from 6:05 p.m. on Tuesdays to**  
**11:00 p.m. on Tuesdays or Wednesdays.**  
**A305, like other OU programmes, was thus even-**  
**tually being broadcast directly to insomniacs and**  
**recording machines, demonstrating the difficulty**  
**of retaining airtime for educational content. At the**  
**same time, such changes in schedule jeopardized**  
**the sense of community engendered by synchron-**  
**ized listening, heightening the perception that the**  
**OU experience was one of studying alone rather**  
**than of being part of a collective.**

**Soon, as prime-time audiences**  
**were no longer being shared**  
**between the OU**  
**and general BBC programming,**  
**accidental encounters between casual viewers**  
**and OU broadcasts were less likely, diminishing**  
**the openness of the university.**

**The epicentre of the conspiracy of education**  
**shared between The Open University and its**  
**audience eventually shifted to the distributed**  
**nodes,**  
**the regional and local study centres,**

which had,  
since the university's early years,  
operated at an intermediate scale  
between the OU's centralized  
broadcasting and its domesticated  
reception.

At study centres, students could interact among themselves and with tutors on a regular basis, sharing a physical space within which to debate topics covered in OU courses.



[M]

The OU also held summer sessions on conventional university campuses, where students could take intensive courses during vacation periods and share in a collective student learning experience.

Together, these two points  
of interaction provided a counterpoint  
to the OU's otherwise individualized  
and domesticated model of higher  
education through broadcasting;  
a model which sometimes

fell short of the openness it purported  
to achieve.

The blended network established by the OU  
combined the centralized production of content  
for television,  
radio,  
and print  
with the local and regional centres  
and summer sessions, distributed  
across the United Kingdom.

The Open University thus mobilized a complex array  
of tools and modes of operation deployed at  
various scales, to reach multiple audiences, both  
at home and in collective environments.

[A]

Advertisement for The Open University,  
published in *Radio Times*, 6 February  
1975: 50. The Open University.  
© Immediate Media

[B]

Harold Wilson addressing the Labour  
Party Conference. Photograph by  
Edward Miller, Scarborough, England,  
30 September 1963. © Getty Images

[C]

Politicians at closing of Labour Party  
Conference, including Prime Minister  
Harold Wilson and Jennie Lee (far right),  
Scarborough, England, October 1967.  
© Getty Images

[D]

Advertisement for The Open University.  
Reproduced from *The Open University:  
A History*, written by Daniel Weinbren,  
2015: 118.

[E]

The first Open University graduation  
ceremony. Alexandra Palace, London,  
England, 23 June 1973. The Open  
University. F1077-96

[F]

Diagram outlining The Open Univer-  
sity's focus on inter-faculty courses.  
Reproduced from *Open University:  
A Personal Account by the First Vice  
Chancellor*, written by Walter Perry,  
1976: 74.

[G]

Still from *Television Delivers People*,  
directed by Richard Serra, 1973.  
© Richard Serra/SODRAC 2018

[H]

An early BBC studio broadcasting  
Open University productions, London,  
England. The Open University.  
200969\_60045

[I]

Open University presenters working  
on the set of a programme for  
module TS282, Electromagnetics and  
Electronics, 1972. The Open University.  
TVC1012-15

[J]

Still of title card from television pro-  
gramme 2 of *Open Forum*, "An Open  
University Discussion," 1971. The  
Open University. 00521\_2702

[K]

Detail from "Farewell to Ally Pally: This  
is the Place Where Television Began,"  
written by Robert Rowland, published  
in *The Listener*, 2 July 1981: 12.  
© Immediate Media

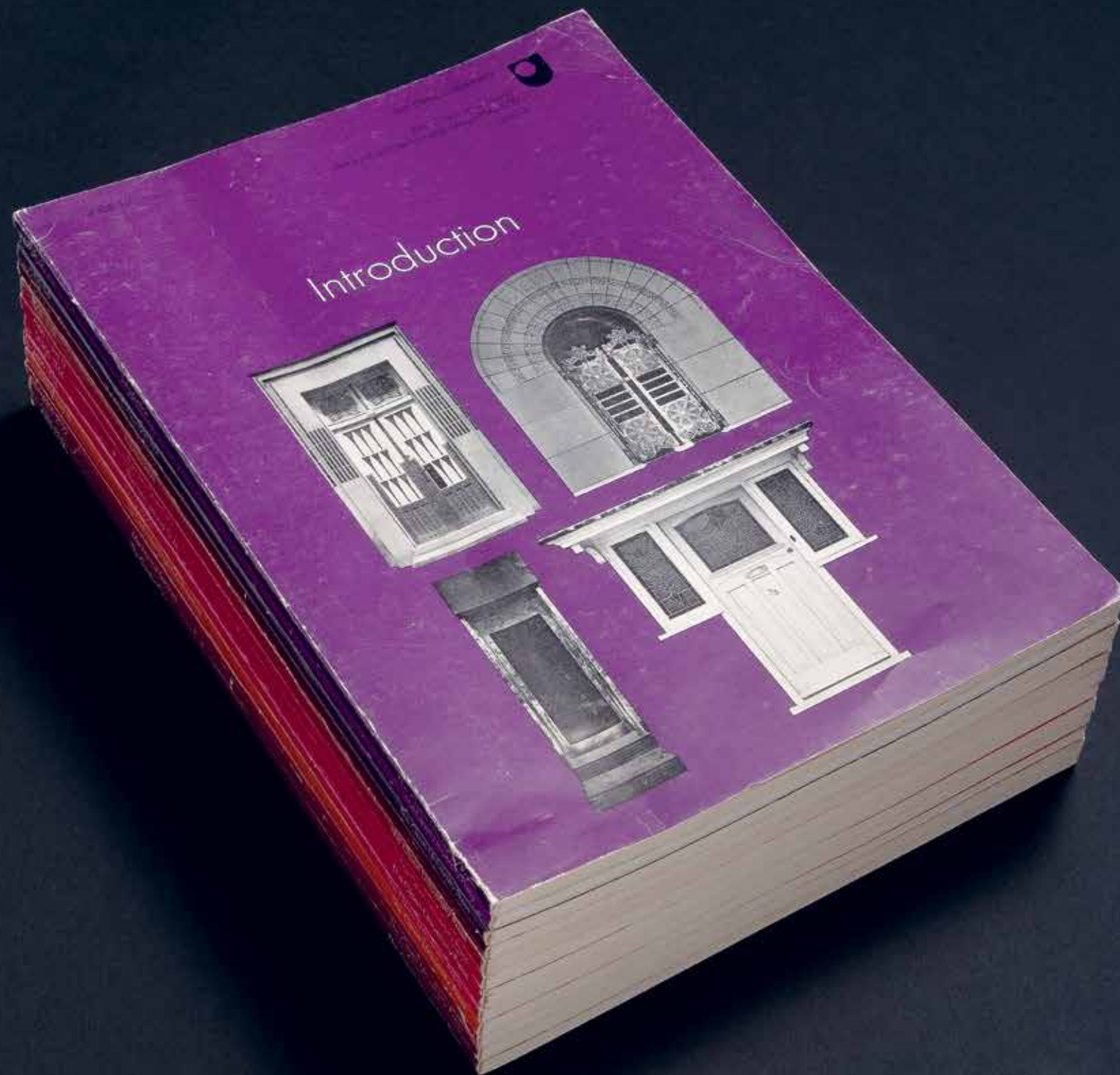
[L]

Student watching an Open University  
programme at home. Reproduced from  
*The Open University: A History*, written  
by Daniel Weinbren, 2015: 160.

[M]

A tutor talking to a group of science  
students in a laboratory at The Open  
University Summer School, 1974.  
The Open University. 000000700078







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A television studio for an Open University programme,  
ca. 1970s. The Open University. F1673-95-2A

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